



Getting to feel free and easy!

We were tired, exhausted, and numb. An emotional tsunami had swept over us leaving us battered and shattered. This break seemed heaven-sent.

As we walked through the door of the rented holiday apartment, we were greeted with something that was so beautifully prepared for us that it took our breath away. The place was perfect. Small touches of thoughtfulness and beauty were scattered through the apartment – fresh flowers, a dog towel and treats, a basket containing everything we needed for an indulgent cuppa, even an Easter egg and card! We looked out onto a well-tended garden enjoyed by birds flying in to feast at feeders before finding shelter in the hedging. Inside, every object and furnishing welcomed us, and we sank into the comfort of the sofa, feeling cocooned and safe.

Even as I write about it, I am warmed by the memory. For a week, this would be our oasis, a beautiful place to return to after exploring the wild places in Northumberland. The place was balm to our souls; a space in which we could begin to feel free and easy again. It was prepared, filled with thoughtful touches. The kindness of strangers who managed the apartment was tangible. Nothing more was needed, except simply receive it as a gift.

Take a little time to...

Recall a time when you have experienced a place that was beautifully prepared for YOU. Maybe write it down as I have just done.

Enjoy the recollection. Stay with it for a while. Don't rush away... Give yourself all the time you need to recognise the importance of the place, the environment, the small details.

Before you move on, take some time to notice your feelings. Have they been affected by the recollection?

Prepared spaces

Our surroundings are so important to us. When we move into a new place, we want to redecorate to make it our own. Expectant parents prepare for their baby's arrival with a well-documented nesting instinct.

The process of preparing an environment for someone special takes thought and effort. It can be a real joy to plan and take time to consider what someone will appreciate. When we invite someone for a meal, we find out what they like to eat because we want to prepare a meal that they will enjoy.

So, what do we know about our child(ren) already?

We need to keep in mind everything we now know about the children in our care (refer to earlier *Getting to Know You* audios).

Remember **how old they are**. Are they absorbing their world unconsciously (babies and toddlers) or more consciously (2 ½ to 5)?



Have we identified their primary **schema**?

3-year-old Max loves to throw! If we create opportunities where he can throw safely, his (*trajectory*) *schema*- will be supported. He is old enough to understand where and what he can throw safely. We might even involve him in setting up a target practice activity, where he can practise and perfect his throwing skills.

Think about what is their current **window of opportunity**?

At 9 months, Todd's is especially sensitive to *order* and is just beginning to get used to his new nursery and new routines. His key person thinks it would be better for him to stay behind today rather than take him to the nature garden.

Our observations and understanding of each child should always help us *work with* the child. If we do, we will avoid many confrontations. Our child(ren) will learn to trust us, knowing that whatever we invite them to do, they will find it enjoyable and fulfilling. This is key to life being 'free and easy'!

In this episode, we consider some useful considerations as we create spaces that meet our child(ren)'s current needs. The better we know them. The better we can create beautifully prepared spaces that allow them to behave freely within it.

Spaces need to be fluid and adaptable to the evolving needs of each unique child. When it does not, the child usually shows us - through their behaviour! Then, we need to remember this really helpful phrase...

Change the Environment, NOT the Child

Allow me to show you around two early years settings...

Both are busy, full of children. They are comparable in both size and layout.

As we walk into the first, the first thing we notice is that it is noisy and a little 'crazy'. There is colour everywhere (a multicoloured number chart hangs on a wall, alphabet bunting is strung across the room, shapes (coloured differently) dangle from the ceiling... A CD playing nursery rhymes can just be heard.

Four or five children are running up and down the centre of the room calling to each other. This impacts the noise level in the whole room. The staff try to change children's behaviours by speaking patiently, repeatedly reminding the children to "use our indoor voices" and "indoor walking feet please".

This has little effect. As visitors, we choose to interpret what we see positively, 'children will be children!' However, another thought creeps in... we wonder... is this maybe too chaotic and too noisy? One practitioner suggests another option. The runners could go outside "to run off energy for a while". You wonder how a timid child might cope in this setting. And we also question, "How are the lively runners benefitting from being in this setting? What are they learning?"





The next setting is strikingly calmer. As adults, we are immediately attracted to its apparent order and peacefulness. The children are active and busy. Some are doing activities on their own; others are in a small cluster making patterns with shaped floor tiles. One practitioner is reading to three interested children, and another is showing a child how to open and close a zip. Another is pouring himself a drink of water from a small glass jug into a small glass tumbler. Then you see a child walking aimlessly around, but then notices a peg puzzle map. He carries it to the table and begins to take out the puzzle pieces independently.

This setting is so different that it feels both surprising and a little unnerving. Is it natural for so many children to be this calm? Shouldn't they be free to play and play often becomes boisterous, doesn't it? You glance into the outdoor space, where an obstacle course is being used (and rearranged!) by six energetic children. You glance into another room where a music session is taking place. A practitioner is involved in an activity using drums. Loud 'crazy' drumming is interspersed with discovering different sounds that the drums can make. OK. Children in these spaces are certainly able to be energetic.

The environments are adapted so that children can freely choose the activity they wish to focus on. They are free and easy within these spaces, and they are all learning!

Faced with these contrasting settings, we instinctively know which one we prefer and find ourselves wondering why...?

What makes this space calm, productive and peaceful?

If we look around the space where our children spend most time, we need to think about:

The physical space

Take a little time to...

look at the spaces your child(ren) spends most of their time. Do this at their level (bottom shuffle or crawl around!)

From this perspective, notice what is at their eye level. Ask yourself:

? does the furniture is an aid to their independence – or not?

? Can they easily reach the things that are current fascinations? ?

? Are the activities muddled or in too big a container for them to access?

Try out some small changes, such as turning an upright set of shelves on its side, so that there are floor level cubbies. Place one activity in a single basket in each cubby.

Try separating out children's activities so that they are easy for your child(ren) to find and get at –baskets and trays are really useful for this!

The appeal of natural & real things

Children are drawn towards **real** activities. In the example above, a child was pouring carefully from a jug into a glass tumbler. It might seem counter-intuitive, but children



respond with real care and concentration if they are entrusted with 'real' objects. The same activity made of plastic is too lightweight. Plastic tumblers tip over, spilling liquid and contents everywhere. Glass is heavier and fit for purpose. On the rare occasions there is a breakage (Dana explains they are infrequent!) children simply see the consequence of their actions. No need to scold or keep saying "be careful!" All that is needed is a quiet,

"Can you sit over there while we clear away the broken glass and it's safe again?"

It's not so much about what things are made from, it is far better to consider how **usable** they are! For example, a plastic watering can be used to water real plants, but a set of plastic keys don't work! They promote aimless play, and children will much prefer a padlock and key which work!

Reflect a little...

Take a look at the resources your child(ren) typically play with.

Ask yourself:

? Are they functional?

? Are there some real objects and tools that they can use?

Try replacing one or two items that currently hold no interest for your child and replace them with items that have a meaningful purpose.

Zoning spaces

It is helpful if children can access different spaces so that they can get to the space best suited for their needs at different times.

We often promote play spaces over more functional ones. Such as a well-designed changing area with a child-sized coat hook and shoe/wellie rack will help the play space be less cluttered and messy.

Where space is limited, zones can be created in the moment, by bringing out a dance mat or a floor cushion for stories. You might already have a plastic mat for messy play and this can simply be extended... A set of plain (but differently coloured) mats to differentiate each activity... (brown for construction, blue for singing / music etc.)

Attractive spaces

We all respond to beauty and children are no exception. They linger longer in places that are ordered and lovely.

So often though we miss the mark when creating our child(ren)'s spaces. The practitioners in the first setting (above) honestly believed that children like music and colour. They assumed that by putting up number charts, shape mobiles and alphabet bunting, that children will learn letters, shapes, and numbers. Individually maybe, but together they



become meaningless. The reason children ran about was that they found it too difficult to focus on any activity. There was too much to distract.

The second setting was more subtle and ordered. The carers here had thought about how to present the activities and displays. Artwork to inspire the budding artist; an attractive comfy reading corner inviting emergent readers; an organised snack table; a beautiful nature shelf to promote an interest in the natural world.

This setting was ordered and peaceful. In it the children and adults were free and easy. As we get to know our children better, we create environments for them. They in turn enjoy looking after *their* spaces (More in ***Delving a little Deeper; Set 2***).

Reflect a little more...

Take a fresh look at the spaces your child(ren) spends most time. Ask yourself:

? How much colour is here? What can I take out for now and maybe swap it for something else later

? How clean is it? Can my child help to keep it clean?

? Take another close look at the resources. Do any books have ripped pages? Are the puzzles complete and pieces in their own container?

Make a few changes and ask yourself:

? Is my child(ren) more calm, busy and productive?

? Are we all more peaceful?

If so, make more changes!

Can the environment help child(ren) to share, learn and play?

Yes!

Let's look at how space can affect this – and more!

The second setting (described above) had a mix of ages all busy doing what they were drawn to – all were 'learning' without any pressure.

The little boy (just 2years) who was wandering around aimlessly was not unhappy, but simply getting to know his new surroundings, noticing the activities available and working out how older children were using them. He soon found something familiar – a peg puzzle (he has these at home) and realised that he could take it off the shelf and use it himself (as the other children were doing). It helped him to settle.

A small group of friends (3 & 4years) were using tessellating floor tiles to make various patterns and designs as they fit more shapes together. They did not need a teacher at this point. As they 'played' they were learning much (size, orientation etc.) and their imaginations



were stimulated as they decided what they were making – a flower... became a rocket... became a dinosaur...

Adults were actively involved in some activities... the crazy drumming session, the obstacle course outdoors, reading stories and a one-on-one activity. They had put thought and effort into creating stimulating activities, with suitable resources. The children in these spaces were free and easy as they 'learnt' seemingly effortlessly.

Change the Environment, NOT the Child

This is probably the most helpful insight I have had, guiding me through many times when children are behaving badly, staff are stressed and parents at their wits' end!

Learning to catch the urge to take control of the children (scolding, nagging, barking orders...), and then ask myself...

How can I change the environment so that s/he/they stop behaving this way?

It is truly transformative!

Have ago and

CELEBRATE & SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS WITH OTHERS ON THE MEMBERS FORUM!

Further information, practical guidance and advice are available through

Turning Little Stones &

Delving a little Deeper

See website for details.